
Government of the District of Columbia



Metropolitan Police Department

Testimony of
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***“Oversight Hearing on the District of Columbia’s
Gun Control Law”***

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Government Reform
Honorable Tom Davis, Chairman

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Room 2154
Washington, DC

Mister Chairman, Congresswoman Norton, other members of the Committee, staff and guests ... thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony concerning the District of Columbia's handgun laws. I appear before you today not just as the Chief of the Metropolitan Police Department, but also as a DC resident, as a father of a teenage son and as a 36-year veteran of the law enforcement profession. It is in all of these capacities that I express my strongest possible support for the District's current law restricting possession of handguns and encourage Congress not to overturn or weaken our laws in any way.

Before discussing the situation here in DC, I do want to point out that the District of Columbia is hardly the only big city in the United States to have a strong handgun control law. Prior to coming to the District in 1998, I spent close to three decades in Chicago, which has a local law on handguns that is very similar to the District's. Chicago residents and their duly elected representatives have chosen to restrict the ownership of handguns, and DC should be afforded the same rights.

Politically, I understand why some members of Congress consider the District's law to be "fair game," even if those same members would never contemplate similar attempts to undo laws elsewhere. But from a public safety standpoint, the reasons to enact and maintain strong and sensible handgun laws are as compelling in DC as they are in Chicago, New York and other cities across the nation. Our residents and our locally elected leaders have all come to the same conclusion: restricting the sale and possession of handguns makes our communities safer.

What impact would the repeal of DC's gun laws have on our city? From my perspective, the answer to that question is straightforward – and it is scary. Repealing our guns laws would mean substantially more handguns in the District of Columbia. And more handguns would mean more gun crimes, more gun violence and more homicides, as well as more accidental shootings and suicides. More guns will also mean a greater threat to our police officers.

Even with our strong gun laws, the District already struggles with the problem of gun violence. Last year, 79 percent of the homicides in DC were committed with firearms. This includes eighteen youth or young adults—the youngest just seven years old—killed with a firearm last year. Moreover, almost fifty percent of our robberies and 20 percent of aggravated assaults are committed with a firearm. Introducing even more firearms into our city would undoubtedly cause these figures to rise. This is especially true in the area of homicide. Our figures show that homicides in DC are frequently motivated by arguments and retaliation. Together with domestic violence, these motives account for half of all homicides in the District. These types of homicides are seldom pre-meditated offenses, but rather spur-of-the-moment, "crimes of passion." When a handgun is readily available in a home or on someone's person, the chances of these encounters turning lethal increase significantly.

Repealing our gun laws would mean more guns being more readily available to more people. And with handguns more readily available, I am concerned that more people would be inclined to use those handguns to settle arguments or domestic disputes, or to retaliate against someone else. I am convinced that these types of incidents, along with the increased likelihood of more accidental

shootings and suicides, would far outnumber any instances in which a handgun in the home might be used as protection.

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Repealing DC's gun laws at any time would be counterproductive to our public safety goals. But repealing our laws now would be particularly devastating. While DC continues to face challenges with murder and other violent crimes, we have made tremendous progress in the last few years in bringing down our violent crime rate. Last year, DC recorded fewer than 200 homicides for the first time since 1986. Overall crime declined by nearly 9 percent in 2003 and by another 18 percent in 2004. So far this year, crime is down by another 14 percent, according to preliminary data.

The bottom line: crime in DC is moving in the right direction, and our neighborhoods are safer than they have been in many years. Now is definitely not the time to put this very encouraging trend at risk by introducing more firearms, and greater potential for violence, into our city.

In fact, part of the reason for our success in reducing crime has been our ability to take more firearms off the streets. So far this year, 1,200 firearms have been recovered, an increase of about 15 percent from 2004. And in 2004, our firearm recoveries topped 2,000 for the first time in several years. We have put a high priority on removing illegal firearms, and our efforts are paying off.

In 2004, of the almost 1,600 registration checks for recovered firearms performed by MPD, only 16 of the firearms—or one percent—were registered in the District. Of course, the vast, vast majority of the weapons we recover originate from jurisdictions outside the District. Last year, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives performed trace checks on over 1,500 firearms recovered by MPD that were linked to crimes. Of these, 736 firearms were successfully traced. Six out of ten firearms were from Maryland and Virginia. The next highest source states were North Carolina, Georgia, West Virginia and South Carolina. So we are continuing to face a serious problem with firearms being brought illegally into the District from other jurisdictions; unfortunately, that problem is not likely to go away anytime soon. But we certainly should not compound this situation by weakening DC's gun laws and making firearms even more prevalent in our city.

Another reason we have been able to reduce crime in the District of Columbia is through our partnerships with other agencies and community-based organizations. On the enforcement end, we work closely with the ATF and other federal agencies on tracing firearms and trying to link them to unsolved crimes. We are also working cooperatively with the US Attorney's Office, the DEA, ATF and others on the Project Safe Neighborhoods initiative, which is targeting the most violent criminals in some of our historically violent neighborhoods, such as Sursum Corda and Barry Farm.

Coordination with the community to combat gun violence is another priority. In just the past two weeks, we have joined forces with the East of the River Clergy-Police-Community Partnership,

ROOT (Reaching Out to Others Together), No Murders DC and other community-based organizations on a number of anti-violence initiatives, especially initiatives that target young people during the summer months.

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The Metropolitan Police Department is very proud of our record in reducing crime and violence in DC. But we also recognize that we still have a lot of work to do, and that to be successful, we must coordinate our efforts with other agencies and organizations both inside the criminal justice system and in the community.

To be successful, we also need strong and sensible laws to protect not only our residents, but also our police officers, as last week's tragic shooting death of an officer in Prince George's County illustrates. The District's ban on most handgun possession is an essential element in our overall crime reduction strategy. This law was enacted with the overwhelming support of DC voters three decades ago, and the law continues to enjoy widespread support among our residents and our police officers today.

Repealing or weakening this law will not make our residents and our neighborhoods any safer. Such a move would actually endanger both our residents and the hard-working, dedicated police officers who already put their lives on the line to safeguard our Nation's Capital. For the sake of our residents and the safety of our police officers, we need to retain the District's strong and sensible law on handguns.

Thank you.